

# Baumgartner, POLI 203

## Spring 2016

Public opinion over time

Reading: Chapter 6 of Decline of DP  
and Discovery of Innocence

March 23, 2016

# Punitiveness

- We grew collectively extremely punitive from the 1970s through the mid-1990s
- See NYT video on web site regarding super-predators.

# Public Opinion

- Polls go back to 1930s, Gallup:
- <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1606/death-penalty.aspx>
- Enns on punitiveness:
  - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/15/why-the-united-states-incarcerates-so-many-people-in-one-graph/>
  - <http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/sociology/criminology/incarceration-nation-how-united-states-became-most-punitive-democracy-world>

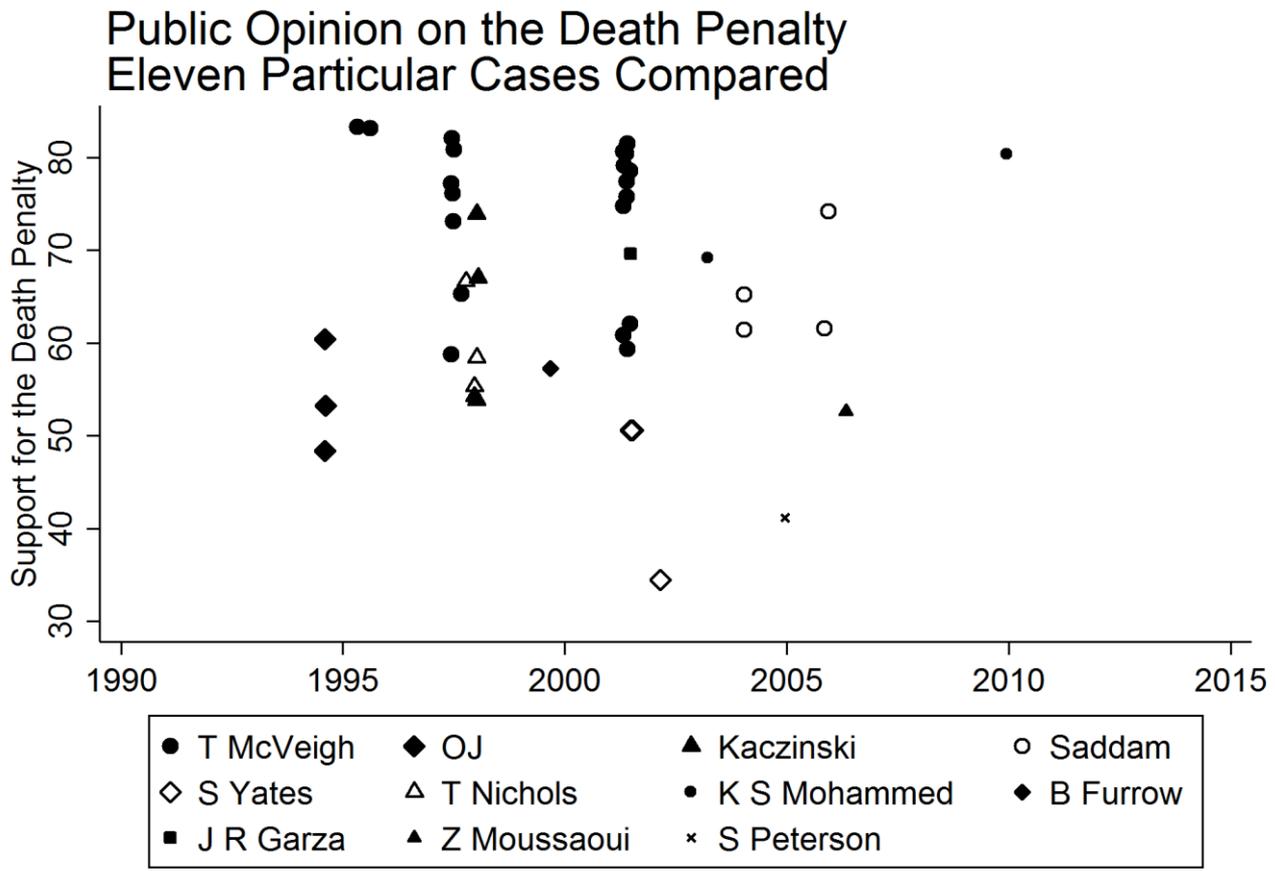
# Who supports, who opposes?

- Support higher among:
  - Whites
  - Males
  - Southerners
  - High school education
  - Republicans
- But it also shows aggregate trends over time
  - That is our focus on the chapter

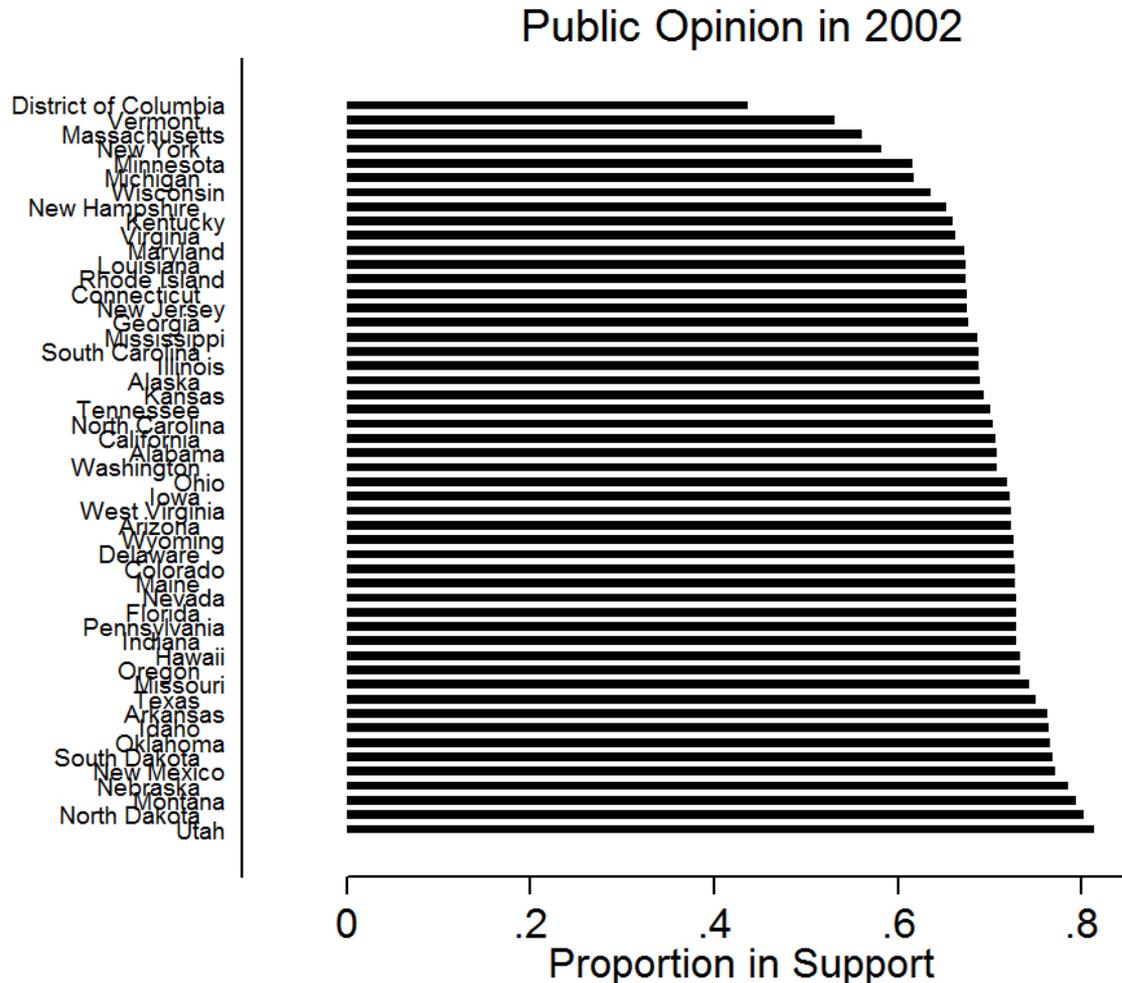
# Depends on the question asked

- See the different results obtained from various questions from Gallup.
- At other times: do you support the death penalty for convicted terrorist bomber Timothy McVeigh? (Very high results)
- No “best way” to ask the question.
- So we look at trends across all questions.

# Support for the death penalty for particular offenders: from 32 to 82 percent



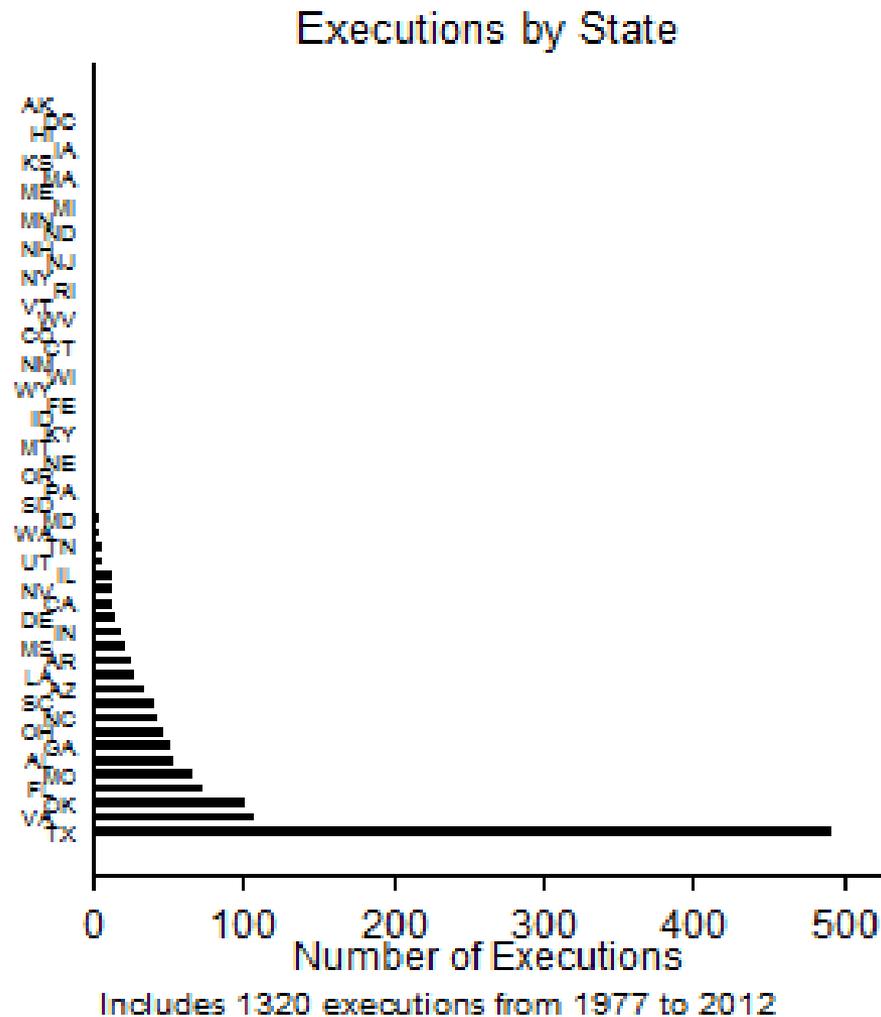
# States Vary by Opinion, Obviously



Mean: 79, Min: 44, Max 81

Source: Pacheco, American Politics Research 2014

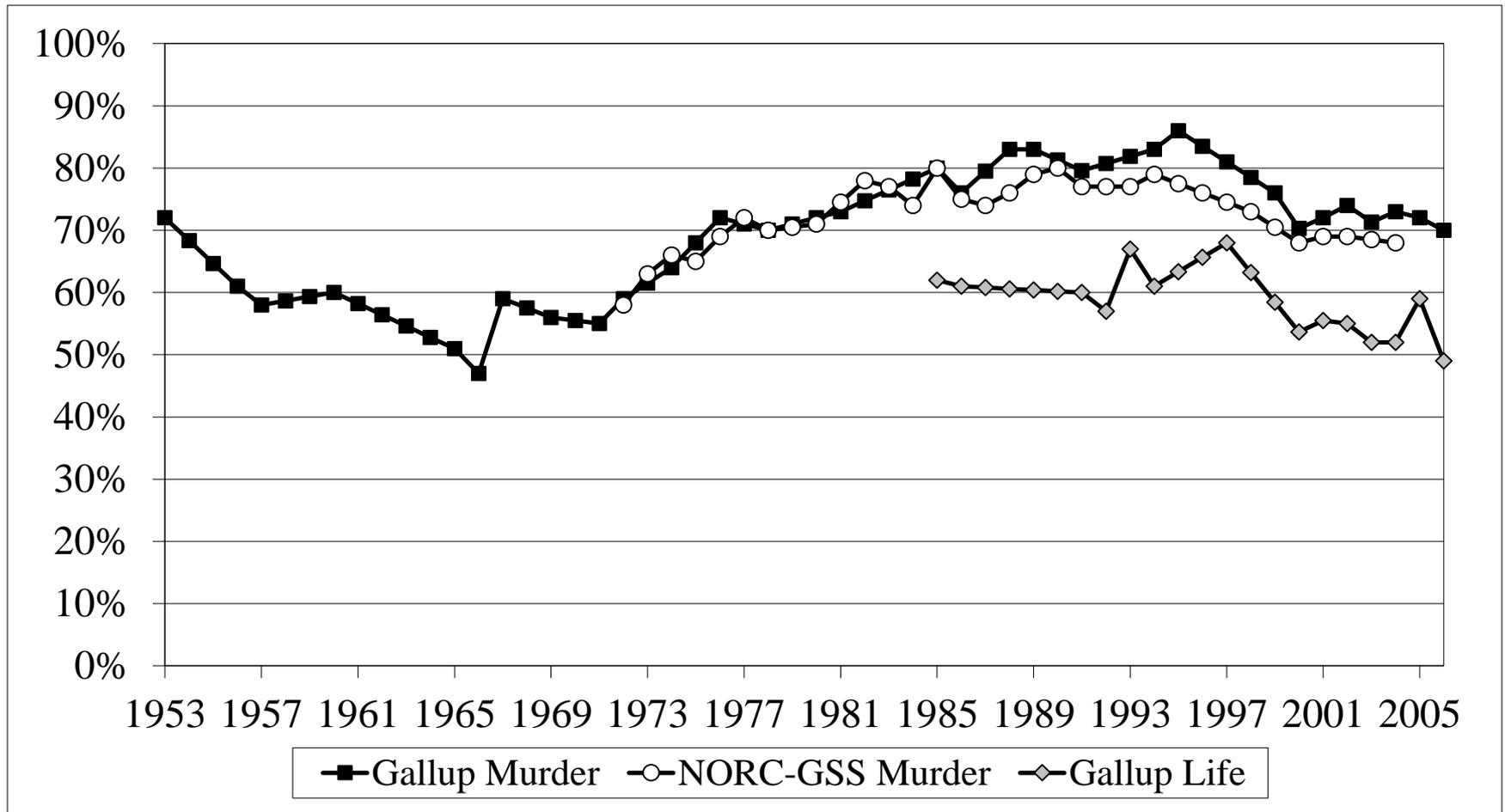
# But they vary a lot more in executions!



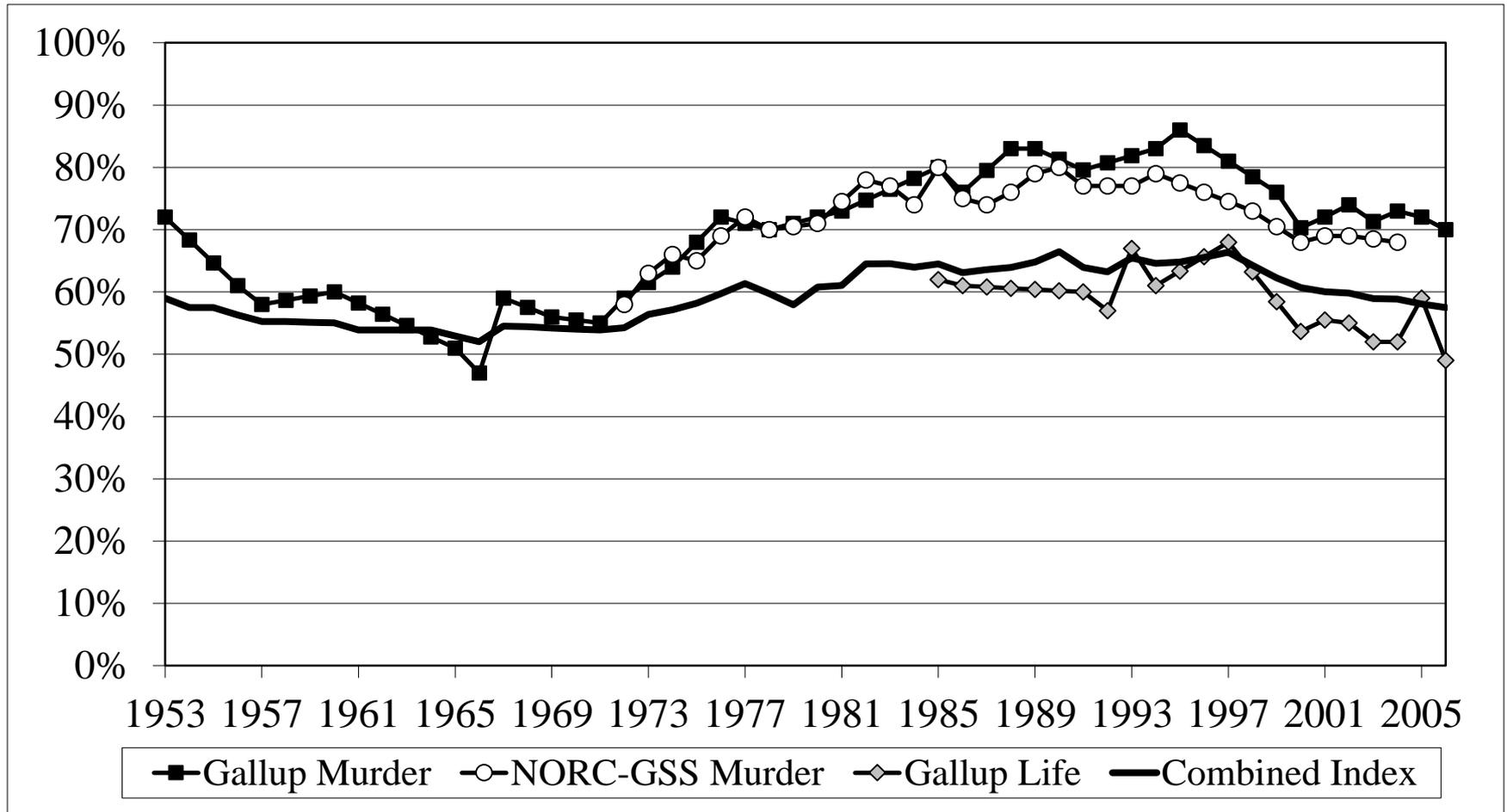
# Our point: how this changes over time

- Depends on the question, of course:
- “Are you in favor of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?”
  - (GALLUP, 42 administrations of this question)
- “If you could choose between the following two approaches, which do you think is the better penalty for murder – the death penalty or life imprisonment, with absolutely no possibility of parole?”
  - (GALLUP LIFE, 18 administrations)
- “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?”
  - (NORC-GSS MURDER, 25 administrations)

# 3 questions, different results, same trend



# So we make an index



# About the index

- See pp. 175 and following in the book
- Lots and lots of questions
  - 67 different survey companies
  - 350 different questions
  - 763 different administrations
- That is, we took all usable information
- Weighted average, shows trends

# What does the index mean?

- It goes up or down.
- We can't very well interpret the raw numbers, however.
- The wording of the question matters a lot for the LEVEL of support.
- As it turns out, it has very little impact on the TRENDS of support over time.
- So we can look at trends but not really levels.
- Need to look back at the individual questions for that.

# Net Support

- About 0 in 1965
- Rises to about +30 by 1980, stays there until 1995
- Declines to about +10 or so in 2006
- Updated in 2015, continues to go down since we did the book. See below.

# Explaining Net Opinion:

- Predicting that series, like we predicted Death sentences last week, same idea
- Table 6.1
- Homicides: 1,000 more homicides > 3.4 increase in net opinion support
- Net Tone: 10 more pro-death penalty stories > 1.5 shift in net opinion
- Very slow adjustments: just 17 percent of disequilibrium per quarter

# What the heck is this professor saying?

- Opinion moves very slowly
  - No single event can be expected to cause shifts
    - People aren't paying attention
    - People have moral views on the issue and don't like to call those into question
  - Only the accumulation of years of similar events, shifting social norms over a decade or more, can be expected to shift opinion

# Long-run trends, blips don't matter

- 1965-1995, one such period: lots of pro-death penalty events, opinion shifted, slowly became more accustomed, accepting of the death penalty
  - Note: some people will NEVER be moved by this.
  - But in the aggregate, opinion moves on average.
- 1995-present, another such period: lots of “bad news” relating to the death penalty
  - Innocence, costs, laws restricting use, less use, abolition by several states, botched executions

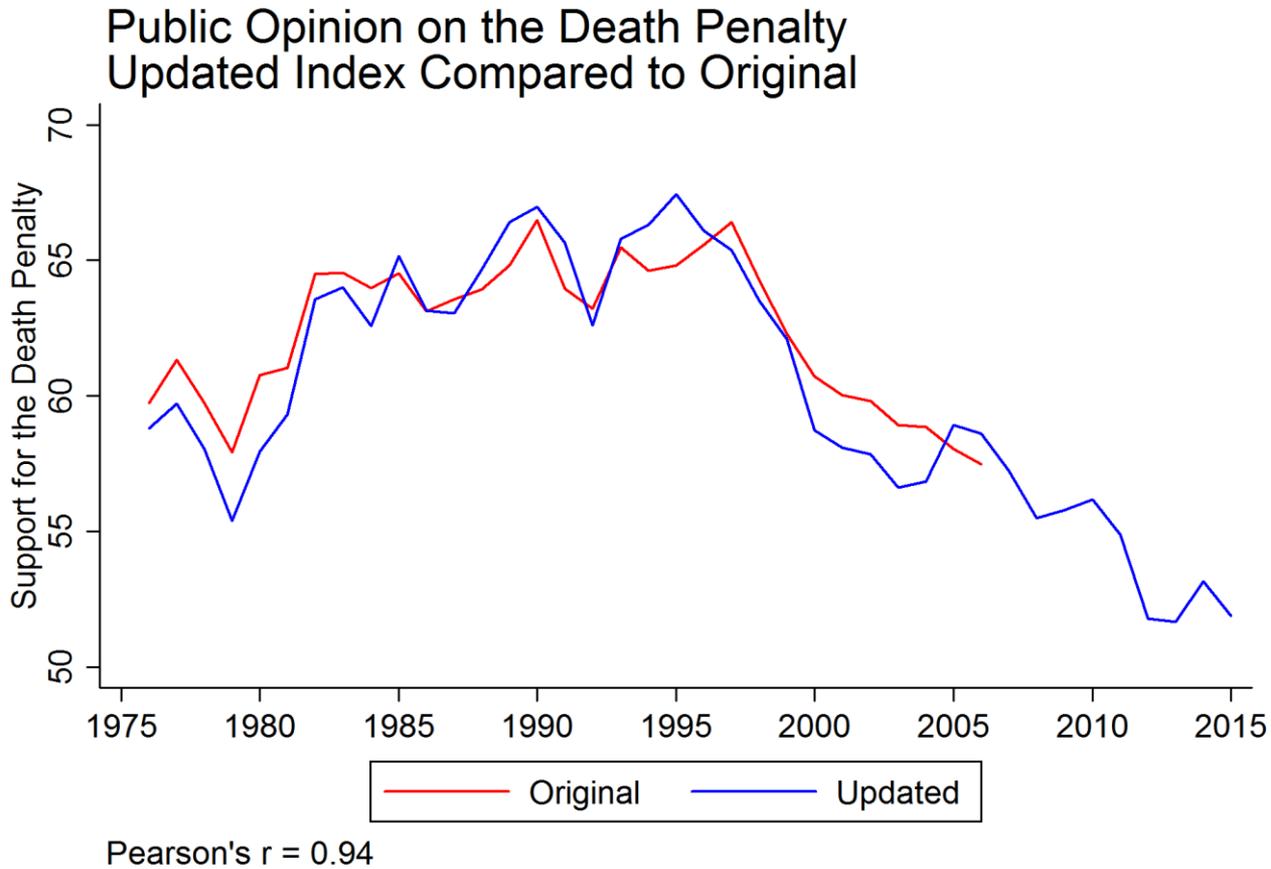
# Remember your first quiz results

- People are not paying attention, obviously
- So, no single event will move national opinion
- But we see an accumulation over time, ever so slowly.

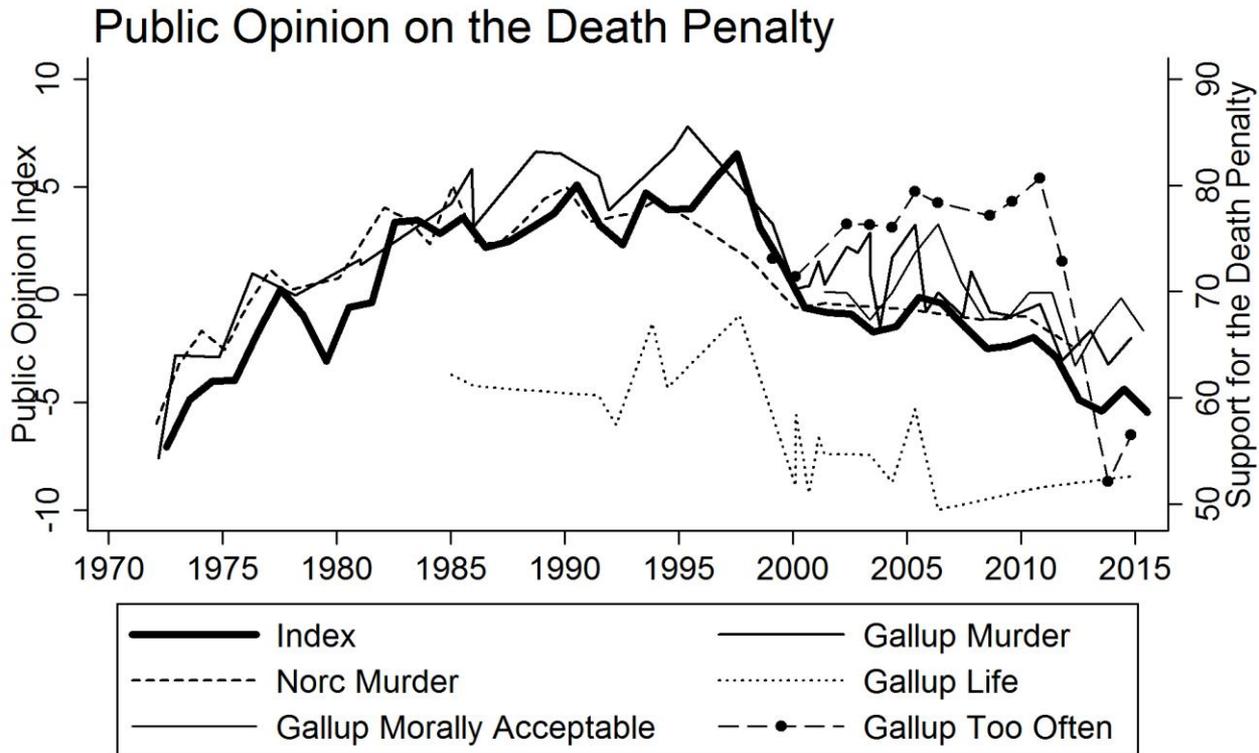
# Should you die because of public opinion?

- We can predict the number of death sentences handed down by juries by:
  - Opinion
  - Tone of news coverage
  - (Homicides had no effect)
- So, timing matters. Same trial in 1993 v. in 2013 might or might not lead to death...  
Ouch!

# Updates, as of April 2015, based on 488 national surveys

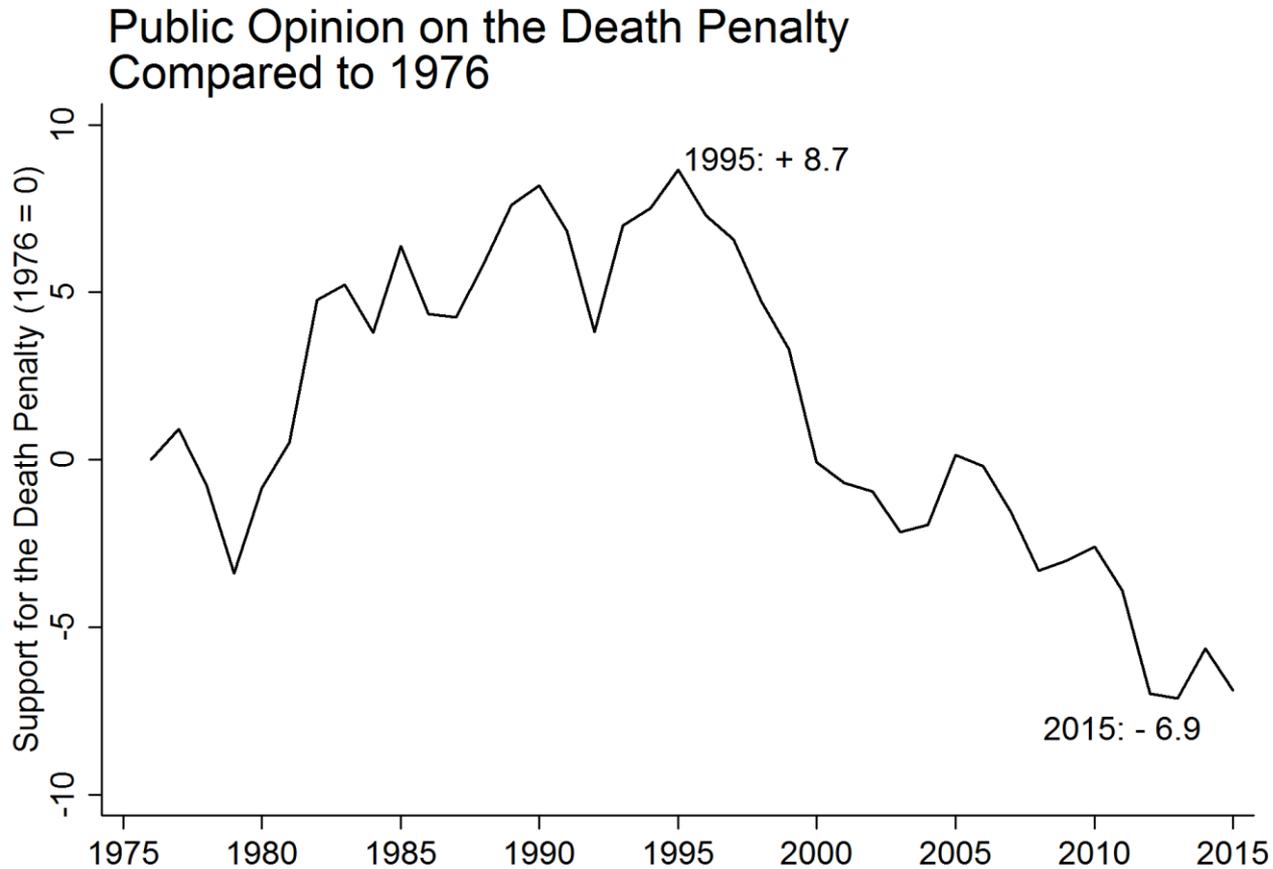


# Combining questions into one index

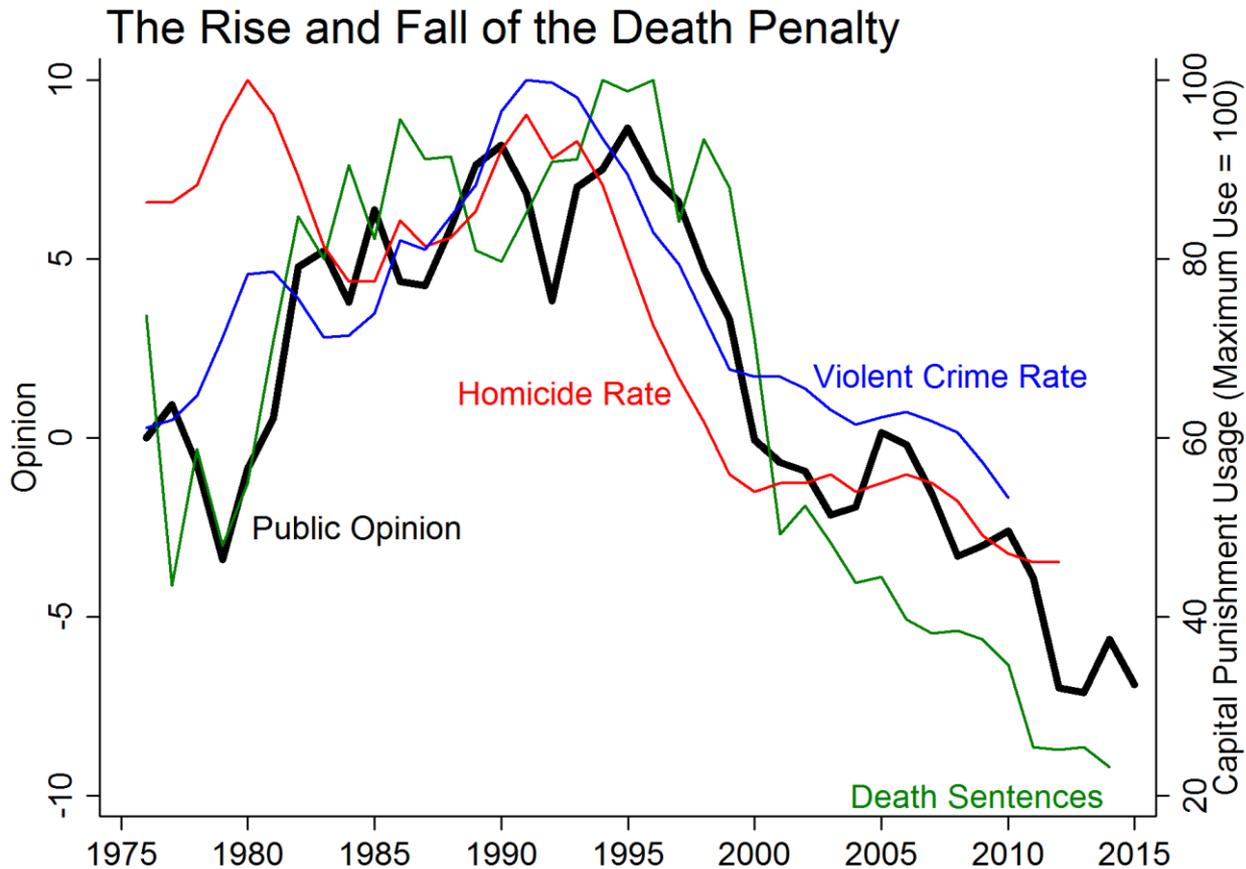


Includes all questions posed at least 10 times to a national sample of Americans. Index is based on 65 individual questions and 372 national polls aggregated using Jim Stimson's Wcalc dynamic dyad ratios algorithm.

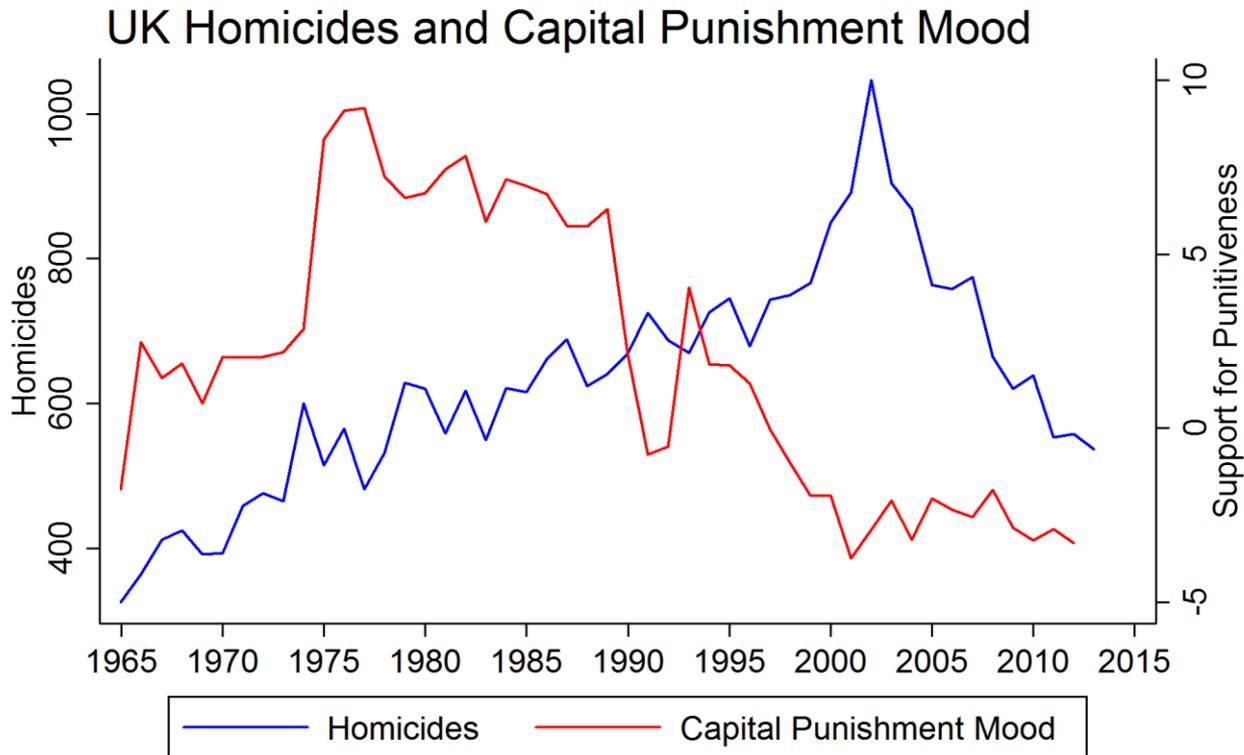
# Compared to 1976, +9, then -7



# Opinion tracks violence and homicides. Death sentences track opinion.

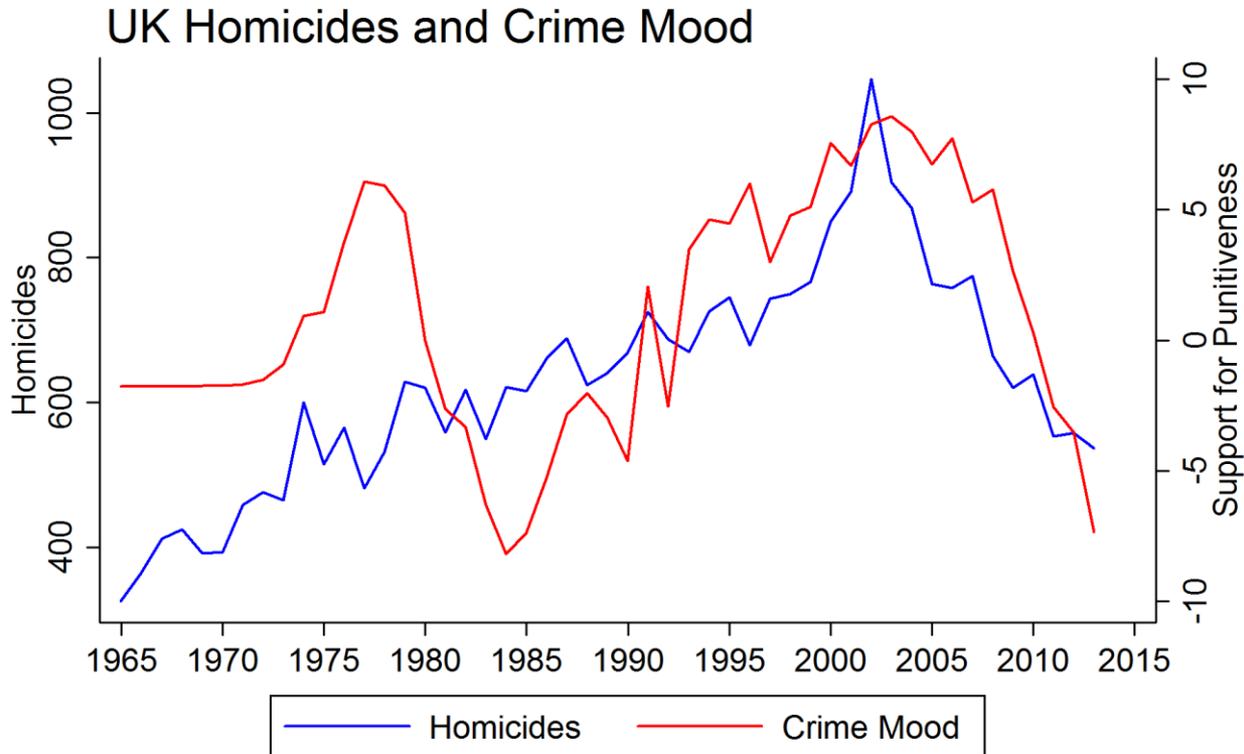


# Compare to the UK, which abolished in 1965



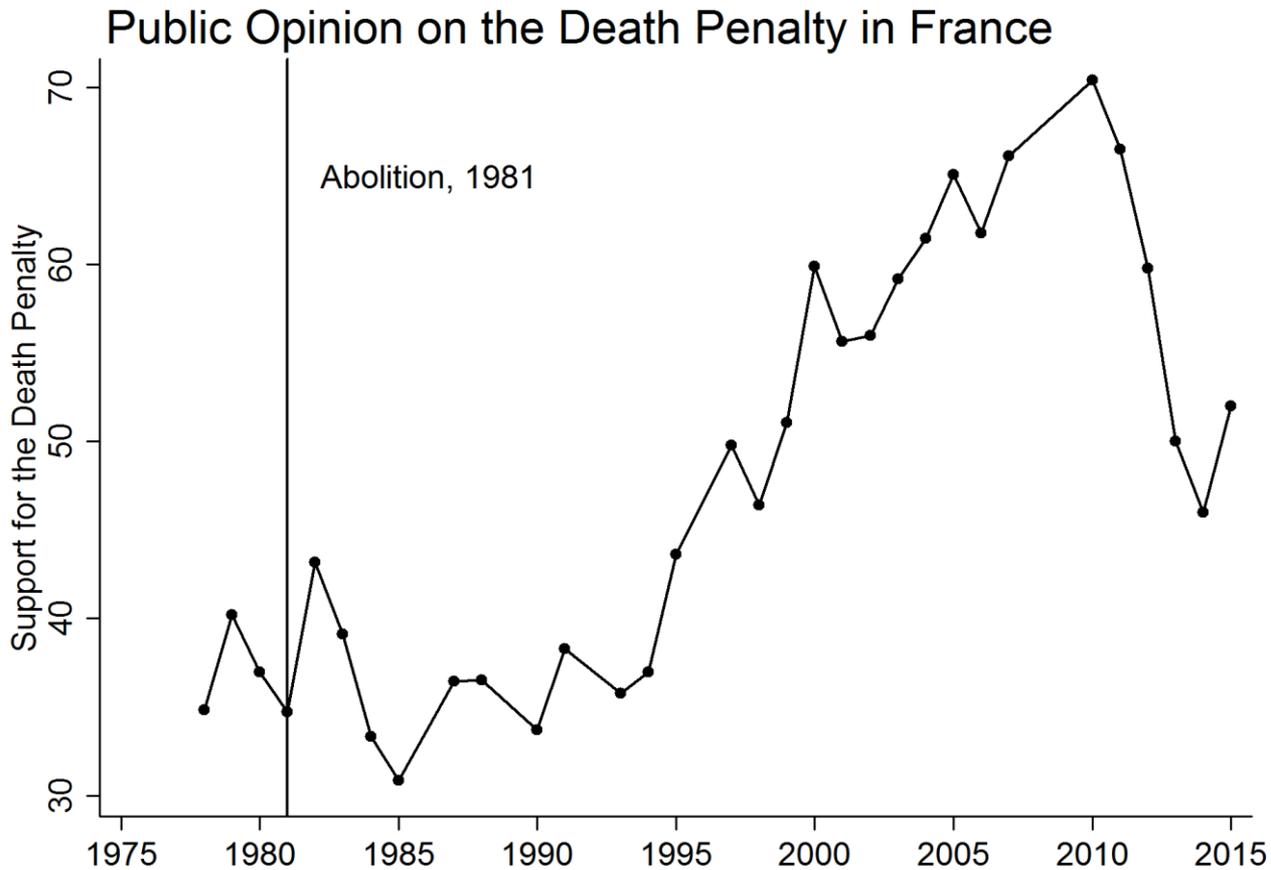
Public opinion series set to a mean value of zero.  
Note: The UK abolished capital punishment in 1965.  
Pearson's R: -0.39.

# UK crime opinion tracks homicides, death penalty did not



Public opinion series set to a mean value of zero.  
Note: Crime mood excludes questions about capital punishment.  
Pearson's R: 0.59.

# France abolished in 1981, not because of public opinion...



# US no more supportive than UK, France

